The System of Aspect, Mood, and Tense
in the English Verb

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0. Introduction

Any in-depth examination of aspect, mood, and tense in English will immediately be confronted with certain underlying issues which must first be addressed in order to understand this system of the verb and how it functions. The first problem, which is perhaps insoluble at the present time, is one of terminology, both in terms of general linguistics and as it currently exists within the English language itself. The second has to do with our present, one-dimensional perception of the grammar of a language as an exhaustive listing of prescriptive rules of usage, or as an equally extensive delineation of expressive effects. This article will offer a differing perspective, one which it is hoped will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the categories of aspect, mood, and tense as they function in English.

1. Problems in Terminology

1.1 General Linguistic Terminology

Languages throughout the world represent and express time in very different ways. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to analyzing and defining these conceptual differences among languages lies in the wide variety of meanings attributed to certain verbal categories commonly in use. Not only is there "no uniformity in terminology" (Comrie, 1976, p. 6), but what is meant by certain categories of meaning in one language may be at variance with what is meant in others, resulting in a great deal of "terminological and conceptual confusion" (ibid., p. 1). Comrie (1976), in one of the most detailed works available on verbal aspect and related concepts as a part of general linguistic theory (i.e., not language-particular), notes that two of the most important categories of verbal meaning, those of tense and aspect, have quite different implications in Slavonic, Romance, and Germanic

languages. (Although a comparative analysis of this sort is beyond our scope here, many of Comrie's insights will be drawn upon in the present work.)

1.2 Grammatical Nomenclature in English

Nowhere is the terminological and conceptual confusion mentioned above more evident than within the English language itself. The use of inappropriate Latin nomenclature to define the largely Germanic grammatical structures of English has often been likened to forcing proverbial square pegs into round holes. Traditional and modern grammarians have attempted to formulate more appropriate definitions, resulting in a wide variety of terminology for which there is little uniform agreement. Moreover, in most languages traditional terminology, whether dated or not, seems to possess a certain inertia, a resistance to change, making advances in this area even more problematic. As a result, traditional terminology exists side by side with more modern definitions in descriptions of modern English grammar. In addition, with the increased importance of English as an international language in this century, and the widespread study of English as a second or foreign language throughout the world, attempts have been made to simplify English grammatical terminology for students, resulting in even further confusion.

1.2.1 The Progressive

One English verbal category which is important in its implications for understanding the system of aspect, mood, and tense, the "progressive," has been labeled in a variety of different ways. Consider the following terms coined by grammarians to describe the progressive: *definite* (Sweet), *durative* (Curme), *continuous* (Onions), *expanded* (Jespersen, Poutsma), *imperfective* (Comrie, Hirtle), *progressive* (Zandvoort), *subjective* (Storms). Today, the terms "progressive" and "continuous" appear to have gained relatively wide currency, though there is far from unanimous agreement as to whether they describe an aspect, a tense, or a form. A brief survey of English teaching grammars[1] provides the following terminology: *continuous tense,* Pollock (1982); *progressive tense,* Azar (1981); *progressive aspect,* Celce–Murcia and Larsen–Freeman (1983); *continuous form,* Close (1958). Modern reference grammars such as Quirk et al. (1972) seem to prefer the term *progressive aspect.* Grammarians who have analyzed these issues in more depth, such as Hirtle (1967) and Comrie (1976), tend to emphasize a contrast between *imperfective* (i.e., progressive) and *perfective* (i.e., simple). Leech (1971), on the other hand, distinguishes between the *simple tense* and, alternatively, the *progressive aspect* or the *progressive form.*

1.2.2 The Perfect

Another English verbal category with important implications for our analysis, the

"perfect," has also been defined in a variety of ways. Azar (1981) uses the term, *perfect tense*, and contrasts it with both *progressive tense* and *simple tense*. Most modern reference grammars (see Quirk et al., 1972) tend towards the label, *perfect aspect*, opposing it to the above-mentioned *progressive aspect*. Comrie (1976, p. 6) notes that "the perfect has usually, but not always, been considered an aspect." He states, however, that it is doubtful whether the perfect can be included within a strict definition of aspect, although it is "equally not just a tense" (ibid., p. 6). He goes on to suggest that "in many recent works by English-speaking linguists, there has been an unfortunate tendency to use the term 'perfective' for what is here termed 'perfect'" (ibid., p. 12). Although Comrie (ibid., p. 52) "doubts whether the perfect should be considered an aspect at all...given the traditional terminology," he does in fact treat the perfect as an aspect, although "in a rather different sense from other aspects."

2. Approaches to Understanding and Teaching Grammar

The examples cited above, involving the progressive and the perfect, have been presented to illustrate the extent of the wide-ranging confusion that exists in applying linguistic terminology to verbal categories in English today. How, in fact, is one to make sense of the bewildering variety of labels and definitions associated with these issues? In order to answer this question, it is first necessary to briefly examine our present fundamental perspectives on how the grammar of a language is viewed. There appear to be two basic ways of presenting the grammar of English today, through reference grammars and teaching grammars.

2.1 Reference Grammars

Reference grammars, both traditional and modern, are based on a listing of rules of usage and a delineation of the expressive effects of grammatical forms in discourse. In terms of the verb, they provide copious examples and explanations of usage, but tend to minimize the importance any kind of theoretical framework to explain the underlying processes involved in the construction of the verb system of English. A good example of this can be found in *A University Grammar of English*, in which one short paragraph, containing the briefest possible explanations, is devoted to the meanings of the terms "tense, aspect, and mood" (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973, p. 40). These types of grammars are implicitly based on a one-dimensional view of language as existing solely in the form of its physical manifestations in discourse, rather than a dynamic process in which grammatical forms shape the lexical content of words within specific contexts. Grammar is seen as a static system of surface categorization, rather than a system of underlying meanings which can be actualized in various contexts. In fact, for many of these grammarians, it would appear that grammar equals syntax: there is an inability to analyze

the underlying operations that give rise to words; grammatical analysis is limited to the relationships between them. Illustrative of this approach is a comment made by Firth (1958, p. 7): "The complete meaning of a word is always contextual." As a result of this kind of reasoning, grammar tends to be presented as a patchwork listing of disparate rules of usage, rather than a coherent system which can account for the vast array of expressive effects that grammatical forms give rise to in context.

Furthermore, in modern reference grammars and textbooks in which linguistic issues are analyzed in more depth, even more confusion is created by failing to distinguish between the basic, underlying meaning of a grammatical form and its uses in discourse. This is particularly evident in presentations of the perfect in English. Comrie, for example, distinguishes between the perfect of result, the experiential perfect, the perfect of persistent situation, and the perfect of recent past (1976, pp. 56–61) without ever attempting to show how these *uses* of the form could be related. The perfect is also often presented as an illustration of the indefinite past. Leech (1971, p. 32) states that "with 'event verbs' the Present Perfect may refer to some indefinite happenings in the past (e.g., He's a man who *has experienced* suffering.)" As Comrie (1976, p. 55) notes, however, "temporal adverbs...provide a useful heuristic device for identifying the Perfect...." Following this line of reasoning, if the perfect is an "expression of past time" as is claimed by Leech (ibid.), we should be able to add a past tense adverb (e.g., *He's a man who *has experienced* suffering *yesterday*.). Clearly, this is not possible. Similarly, many grammarians fail to distinguish between the meaning of adverbs associated with the perfect on the level of usage and the basic, underlying meaning of the form. Leech (1971, p. 33) states that "it is worth recognizing a sub–category of the indefinite past meaning, that of RECENT INDEFINITE PAST [and its] association with the adverbs *just, already, recently,* and *yet*" (e.g., I *have* just *eaten*.). However, as Comrie (1976, p. 60) states, "the perfect [itself] does not...imply that the past situation is recent, since present relevance does not necessarily imply recentness." By deleting the adverb in the above example (e.g., I *have eaten*.), we get a much different expressive effect — i.e., "I'm not hungry now." Thus, failure to distinguish the basic, underlying meaning of a grammatical form such as the perfect from its adverbial collocations, results in an inability to present language as a coherent system of meaning.

In short, in these types of grammars, language is seen solely as a summation, rather than as an operative system. In fact, however, grammar is not *what* we think, but *how* we think it, the form we give a concept, and different languages do this in different ways. In order to understand the system of aspect, mood, and tense in English, it is necessary to think operatively; i.e., to think of the construction of the image of time within the system of the English verb as an *operation.*[2]

2.2 Teaching Grammars

Teaching grammars, on the other hand, take a different approach. In an attempt to simplify grammar for students, particularly those involved in L2 learning, they supply less extensive grammatical explanations than do reference grammars. Drills and explanations are provided for student practice, and the grammatical explanations presented are tailored to fit these exercises. Most of these teaching grammars claim to be designed for advanced levels of study: "Grammar for High Level Students" (Pollock, 1982), "...for intermediate through advanced students..." (Azar, 1981, p. 81), "...to provide advanced students...with...practice..." (Frank, 1972, p. ix). Yet, surprisingly, there is little attempt to go beyond simplified grammar and limited usage and account for usage which is the least bit out of the ordinary, or which varies from that which is necessary to complete the carefully constructed exercises and drills. The fact that this approach is at variance with numerous examples found in English is generally ignored, and students usually have to discover the complexities and pitfalls of more advanced usage for themselves, and often have to correct what was learned at earlier levels. More importantly, students are never provided with a coherent overview of how verbal categories, such as aspect, mood, and tense, operate within the system of the English verb.

3. Definitions

Before beginning an examination of aspect, mood, and tense in more detail, it is first necessary to clarify a number of conflicting expressions involving verbal categories which give rise to confusion and which are crucial to any understanding of this system of the verb.

3.1 Tense vs Time Spheres

Quirk & Greenbaum (1973, p. 40) state that "time is a universal, non-linguistic concept with three divisions: past, present, and future; by *tense* we understand the correspondence between the form of the verb and our concept of time." Ambiguous statements of this kind give rise to the impression that in English we have three tenses: past, present, and future. However, there is nothing in the English verb system that represents the present — *there is no present tense*. Comrie (1976, p. 5) suggests that "tense is a deictic category, i.e. locates situations in time, usually with reference to the present moment." This statement is closer to the mark, but still does not give a clear idea of how tense operates in the system of the English verb. Closer still is a conceptual scheme developed by Guillaume (Hirtle & Hewson trans., 1984, p. 7) in which he states that "there is a trimorphic spatialization of time (past, present, future) found in ancient Greek, Latin, and the Romance languages, and a dimorphic spatialization, characteristic of the Germanic languages (past, extensive present)." In this representation of the tenses of the indicative in English, the present moment is "the ever fleeting boundary between past and future" (Jespersen, 1954). In

English, the present is simply an instant in time, one that separates the past from the non-past. Therefore, for the purposes of this article, we will refer to the *tenses* of the English verb in the indicative mood as *past* and *non–past*, while the "universal, non–linguistic concepts" of *past, present, and future* will be referred to as *time spheres*.

3.2 Mood vs Modals

Webster's (1990, p. 770) states that mood relates to "a particular set of inflectional forms of verb to express whether the action or state it denotes is conceived as fact or in some other manner (as command, possibility, or wish)." We will be examining three moods in the English verb system: the indicative, the subjunctive, and the quasi–nominal. It is necessary, however, to distinguish between the subjunctive mood as part of a particular set of inflectional forms of the verb, which denote the virtuality of an event, and modal auxiliary verbs, which also express the potentiality of an event, but through the appreciable lexical content they carry into discourse.

3.3 Tense vs Aspect

As we have seen in section 1.2.1, and as Comrie (1976, p. 1) notes, there is considerable "terminological and conceptual confusion [regarding] tense and aspect." Tense involves forms of a verb that express distinctions of time, and different languages do this in different ways. English has two tenses in the indicative, past and non–past; Romance languages distinguish three tenses, past, present, and future; many languages lack tenses altogether (i.e., do not have grammaticalized time reference), though probably all languages can lexicalize time reference through the use of temporal adverbs (see Comrie, p. 6). As indicated, however, with aspect "there is no generally accepted terminology" (ibid., p. 11). As a starting point for understanding the category of aspect in English, and as a means of distinguishing aspect from tense, we shall agree with Sweet's definition that aspect involves "distinctions of time independent of any reference to past, present, or future" (1955, p. 101).

3.4 Progressive Aspect vs Perfect Aspect

One of the major difficulties in analyzing the category of aspect in English is that once aspect has been distinguished from tense, "the term 'aspect' suffers from...the disadvantage [of being used] as a general cover–term for a variety of different kinds of distinction" (Comrie, 1976, p. 6). This confusion is encountered in the use of the term aspect to describe both the progressive and the perfect in English. Even though they perform significantly different functions, by labeling both the progressive and the perfect as aspects, students are given the mistaken impression that they somehow oppose one another in the

system of the English verb. This is clearly not the case, although they do combine in one verbal category, the perfect progressive. Comrie himself seems to be "hedging his bets" on this issue. He states that "aspect is...concerned with the internal temporal constituency of [a] situation [i.e., imperfective vs perfective; or, progressive vs simple]" (1976, p. 5). Later, however, he goes on to define the perfect as "an aspect in a rather different sense from the other aspects treated so far" (ibid., p. 52), and describes it as a means of relating "some state to a preceding situation," though telling us "nothing directly about the situation in itself" [i.e., the perfect] (ibid.). He supports his stance by stating that "since the perfect is very often referred to as an aspect, discussion of it has been included in the present book" (ibid., p. 6). Jespersen, however, in an early critique of the tendency to classify various heterogenous distinctions as aspect (e.g., progressive and perfect), suggests that "the different phenomena which others have brought together under this one class (or these two classes) should not from a purely notional point of view be classed together" (1951, p. 287).

4.0 The System of Aspect, Mood, and Tense in the English Verb

It should be evident from the preceding sections that our current perspectives on English grammar have resulted in a terminological and conceptual morass which precludes any systematic and coherent understanding of the functioning of the English verb. As a result, most modern grammarians, while methodically delineating the vast array of contextual meanings and effects of grammatical forms, tend to deliberately avoid addressing the question of how these forms are generated.

This paper will present a new approach to these issues, one in which the verb is viewed as a coherent, operative system, giving rise to the myriad expressive effects found in discourse. This approach is based on the work of the French linguist, Gustave Guillaume, and the application of his theories to English by Walter Hirtle, Roch Valin, and John Hewson. It should be stated at the outset, however, that there are certain serious problems related to these works. First of all, because Guillaume wrote in French, many of his ideas are not easily accessible to English speakers. Furthermore, as Hirtle & Hewson (1984, p. xix) note, translations of Guillaume's theories pose a "particular danger [as] a language relates to its own cultural matrix, and the latter remains foreign even in a translation." Guillaume's approach to linguistics is neither mechanist nor reductionist, and "a reader reared on the psychology of Skinner, on the Cartesian mechanism of Chomsky, on the positivism of Wittgenstein, may well suffer from culture shock" (ibid.). More importantly, however, many of Hirtle's (1967 & 1975) earlier writings in particular, though elegant in design, remain unnecessarily obscure and virtually inaccessible to the ordinary reader. This paper, then, is presented, not as an original work, but rather as a synthesis, a simplicfication and clarification, of the above-mentioned authors, in the hope of making them more accessible to serious students of English.[3]

4.0.1 The Approach

The approach to the system of the English verb used here was conceived and first employed by Gustave Guillaume. Many publications of Guillaume's works are now available for those who wish to study his method of analysis in more detail,[4] but for the purposes of this article we will limit ourselves to an outline of some of the more important of Guillaume's basic principles:

• The relation between the physical and the mental is the most important and most neglected relationship in the study of language. If the various contextual senses of a grammatical form arise as *actualized meanings,* what is the underlying, *potential meaning* from which they arose? For example, there are two ways of studying the imperfective (i.e., progressive, in English):

> It can be studied in discourse alone, in the sentence as expressed, in which [it] has not just one shade of meaning, but a thousand. Any attempt to reduce all thousand of these to any one [basic meaning] would be wasted effort; one would inevitably get lost in making distinctions. The alternative is to study [it] first [as a potential, underlying meaning] to discover the unchanging systematic condition that it represents. (Guillaume, 1984, p. 98)

• Language is more than a summation, a result; there is a movement, an operation in constructing language. In analyzing language, it is necessary to think *operatively* — i.e., anytime you see a result, think of the operation that caused it. Because everything in language is process, one should "focus on the operational rather than on the more apparent resultative" (ibid., p. xiii).

• "An act of language, rapid though it may be, is accompanied by a passage of time" (Hirtle, 1967, p. 12). In other words, a "micro–stretch of time," *operative time,* is necessary for "this mental process to unroll" (Guillaume, 1984, p. xiii). By focusing on this operative time, the linguist is able to determine a *notional chronology* to view potential meanings "as the consequences of their position — intitial, medial, or final — within the system" (ibid.). "Thus the idea of virtuality necessarily implies priority with regard to the idea of actuality. Similarly an operation must be seen preceding its result and a condition its consequence" (Hirtle, 1967, p. 44).

• For speakers of Indo–European languages, "the most general system of the language [is] that of *the word.* The grammar of a language [is] a system of systems wherein the form of the general system of the word is reiterated in each of the subsidiary categories of word (the parts of speech)" (Guillaume, 1984, xvi). "The word has the same general structure in every Indo–European language although the architecture of the sub–systems may be

different in each language.[5] [Thus] the *part-of-speech* structure is the starting point for the speaker of an Indo-European language" (ibid., xvi-xvii).

• Time, not being representable by itself, bases its means of representation on spatial characteristics, "in the absence of which we would know time only as experience" (ibid., p. 6). Diagrams or schematics are used to illustrate this *spatialization of time,* as they "can bring out a system of relationships better than words" (ibid., p. 18).
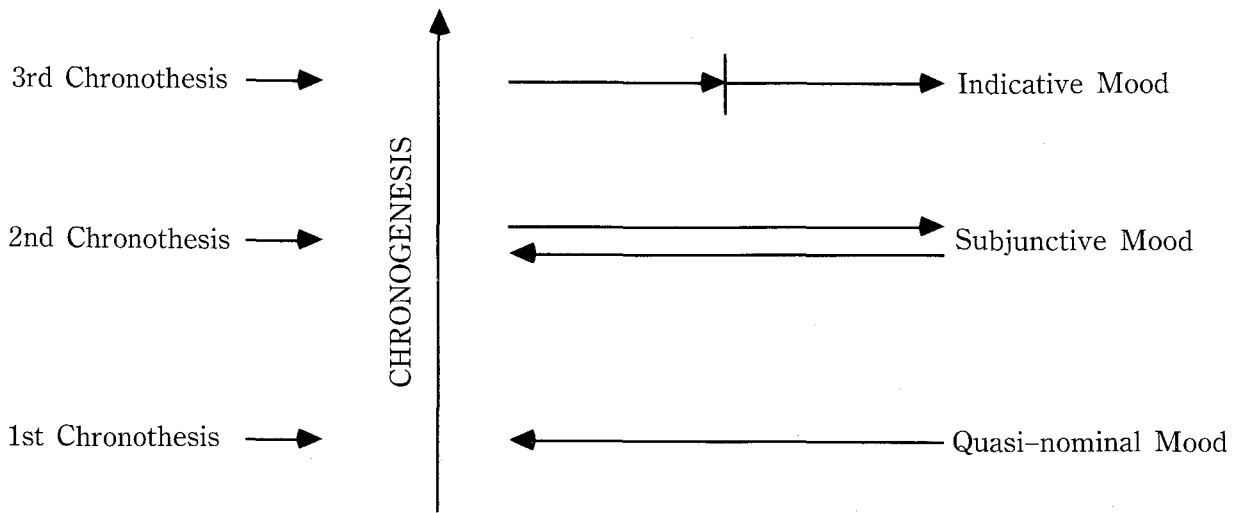
4.0.2 Time and the English Verb

On the basis of the above principles, we can state that in English the verb provides an operative mechanism for representing time grammatically. But this is a double representation. Our immediate experience brings us into contact with only the duration of particular happenings. Yet we know that these happenings are situated in a larger stretch of time. We can distinguish, therefore, between time as the container of all events (*universe time*) and time contained in any event (*event time*). A sufficient image of the verb must include a representation of universe time and event time, and a conjugation of the two. The operative mechanisms that grammatically represent this complete image of time are found in the systems of aspect, mood, and tense.

4.1 The System of Mood

One of the categories of the English verb, that of mood, can be explained on the basis of universe time. Mood is an operative system, an unconscious mental process, through which our grammatical representation of time is constructed, from the most abstract to the most concrete, from the most rudimentary to the most constructive, from an incomplete to a final representation. There are three moods in English: the quasi-nominal (consisting of the (to) infinitive, present participle, and past participle: so named because they can function either as verbs, or as nouns or adjectives in discourse), the subjunctive (denoting the virtual, the unreal, the potential, and used in discourse to express wishes, possibilities, commands, etc.), and the indicative (expressing that which is conceived of as factual or real). This mental operation, which consists of constructing a formal representation of time, is called *chronogenesis* (from the Greek: *chrono* – time; *genesis* – to generate). It can be held up at certain points and the resulting image is called a *chronothesis*, each of which corresponds to one of the three grammatical moods of English. Each mood, therefore, represents a different moment in the mental system of constructing a time image, and so gives a different representation of universe time. The events which our immediate experience brings us into contact with can be situated in one of these representations. Mood, therefore, is a single operation or sequence, which can be intercepted at initial, medial, or final positions, each one representing a *chronothesis* or grammatical mood of

English.

4.1.1 The Quasi–nominal Mood

The quasi–nominal mood is the most rudimentary of the time images of the English verb. Events are perceived in three ways: with *the infinitive* (e.g., (to) go), as something yet to be realized; with *the present participle* (e.g., going), as something which is being realized; and with *the past participle* (e.g., gone), as something that has already been realized.
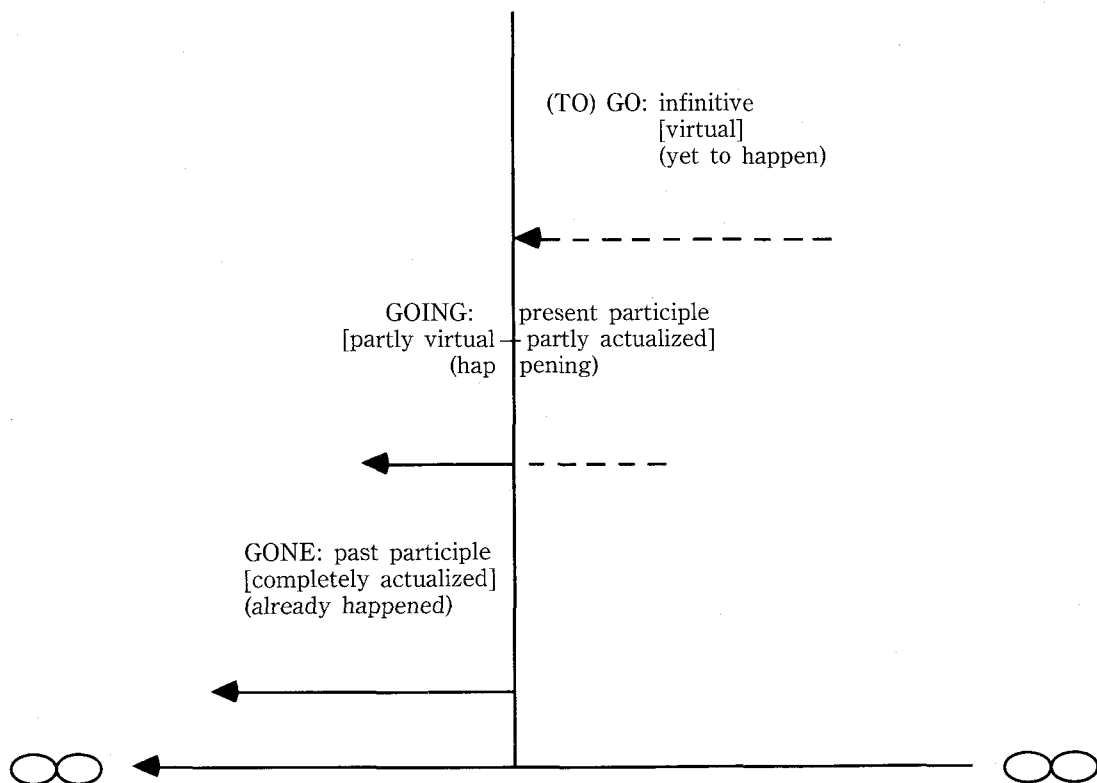
In the quasi-nominal mood the infinitive presents an event whose whole development is seen in the offing, as not yet actualized. The present participle presents a partly developed event, one split between "not yet" (time not actualized) and "already" (time already actualized). With the past participle the event seen as over; it is seen in retrospect.

The following examples may help in visualizing the three ways that events are perceived in the quasi-nominal:

- There is an hour *to go*. [yet to happen; approaching actualization]
  There is an hour *gone*. [already realized]

- At an auction: *going, going, gone*

- a bride *to be* [yet to be actualized]

- a *falling* tree [partly actualized — present participle used as an adjective]
  a *fallen* tree [already actualized — past participle used as an adjective]

- There's nothing *to do*.
  There's nothing *doing*.
  There's nothing *done*.

From the operational standpoint, this first *chronothesis* arises when the operation of *chronogenesis* is stopped immediately in its first instant, resulting in the quasi-nominal mood. Characteristic of this mood is the fact that there is no representation of *person* and no representation of the *present*. Universe time is seen as rudimentary, time moving along with no beginning and no end: the only way for an event to be real is for time to bring it to us from the future, with time moving from a field that is not yet actualized toward a field of time that has already been actualized. Because there is no representation of *person* in the quasi-nominal mood, there is no spatial entity to which we can anchor the verb. As a result, we do not look at the event from the point of view of the subject. The three tenses evident in the quasi-nominal mood are actually three ways of looking at an event in the absence of a subject from the point of view of non-finite verb forms (non-finite verbs do not take a subject and can thus be used as substantives — e.g., *Working* is good for the health.). Because there is no reference to the *present* in the quasi-nominal mood, there is no such thing as time spheres (i.e., past, present, future), and events can be situated anywhere in time.
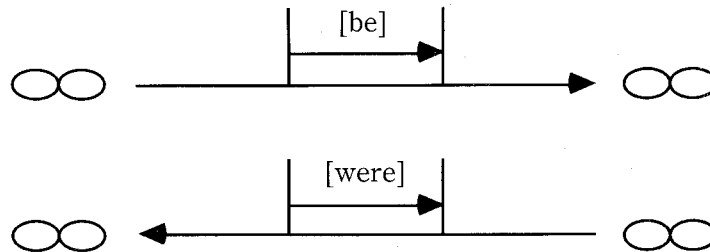
4.1.2 The Subjunctive Mood

From this least constructive image of universe time in the quasi-nominal mood, which

is perceived through the infinitive and two participles, and in which there is no representation of person and no reference to the present, the operation of the construction of the time image continues to its second moment or interception: the subjunctive mood.

Present Subjunctive: still virtual, but given time may be possible
"I suggest that you be more careful."

Past Subjunctive: impossible to actualize
"If I were you, I would be more careful."

There are two tenses in the English subjunctive mood: the present and the past:
• The past subjunctive is now thought to be archaic for the vast majority of verbs in English, but still exists with the verb *to be* (e.g., If I *were* you...; If he *were* rich...). With the past subjunctive, what is evoked is considered to be impossible to actualize (i.e., I can never be you.).
• The present subjunctive, although still depicting events that are considered virtual or unreal, suggests that the potentiality of the event, given time, may be possible (e.g., He suggested that she *work* tomorrow.).

It should also be noted that because the subjunctive's field of usage in modern English has never been comprehensively defined (see Hirtle, 1964, p. 80), it is a rather controversial form which many grammarians consider to be "fossilized" or "gradually dying out" (ibid., p. 75). However, far from being extinct, the present subjunctive can be easily identified where it is morphologically different from the indicative, as with the verb *to be*, and through the absence of the *s*-ending in the third person singular:
  • A bilingual country may require that its civil servants *be* fluent in the official languages of the country.
  • All I ask is that she *look* after the kids. (ibid., 1964, p. 77)
Where the subjunctive is not morphologically distinct from the indicative, it can be distinguished by a substitution technique: by putting a third person singular noun or pronoun into the subject slot and observing the effect on the verb (ibid., p. 78):
  • We suggest that you *experiment* with your own flavors.
  • cf. We suggest that the buyer *experiment* with his own flavors.
The present subjunctive can also be recognized through the formation of the negative without the auxiliary *do*, by taking *not* before (ibid.):

- The doctors suggest that I not *drink* coffee.

Through these techniques, we can see that although the subjunctive is sometimes difficult to recognize in discourse, it has certainly not disappeared as many grammarians would suggest.[6]

In the operative system through which our grammatical representation of time is constructed, the subjunctive is very much alive. At this medial position in the operation of *chronogenesis*, a more complete time image is realized through the introduction of the category of *person*. The verb now has a subject to anchor it in space, but there is still no division of universe time into time spheres, so the image is still not seen as complete. Without reference to the present, the subjunctive can never express the actualization of the event (as in the indicative), and so the event is seen as virtual, unreal, potential. The event cannot be represented as really existing because there are no divisions into time spheres, thus no anchor for the event in universe time, and so no representation of the event as real is possible. As a result, the subjunctive is used to evoke wishes, possibilities, hypotheses, commands, etc. This distinction between the subjunctive and the indicative in terms of time spheres can be seen clearly in the following examples:

- I suggested that he *work* tomorrow / today / yesterday. [In the subjunctive mood there is no representation of the present.]
- cf. I know that he *works* tomorrow / today / *yesterday. [In the indicative there is a clear distinction between past and non-past.]

4.1.3 The Indicative Mood

The operation of the construction of the time image in English reaches its conclusion in the indicative mood with the insertion of the present moment. Universe time is now divided into two stretches, the past and the non-past. This third and final moment in the mental operation underlying the system of mood contains both a representation of *person* and of the *present*, thus allowing the event to be depicted as real both in time and in space. As a result, the indicative mood is used to depict events that are considered real or factual.

There are only two forms of the verb in English in the indicative: two tenses, two representation of time — past and non-past (e.g., worked / work(s)).
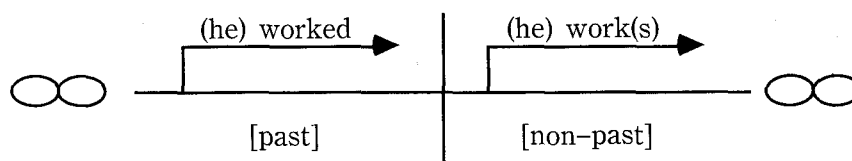
### 4.1.4 A Synthesis of the System of Mood

The system of mood can thus be seen to consist of a building up of a representation of time from an incomplete to a final representation. This mental operation is called

chronogenesis, and each resulting image is a *chronothesis* which is obtained by holding up the operation at certain points.

In the quasi-nominal mood, the operation is stopped immediately. There is no representation of person (i.e., no subject) and no reference to the present. There are three tenses in the quasi-nominal: the (to) infinitive, the present participle, and the past participle. These non-finite forms of the verb act as "building blocks" for a more complete representation of the verb.

In the subjunctive mood, a subject is introduced, but there is still no representation of the present to anchor the event in time, and as a consequence the event is seen a virtual, unreal, potential. There are two tenses in the subjunctive, past and present, but neither is restricted to a particular time sphere. Both present the event in terms of its potential (negative or positive) of being actualized.

In the indicative mood, the present moment is introduced, and each event is evoked in terms of its reality. The present in the indicative is represented as limit, resulting in two tenses, the past and non-past.
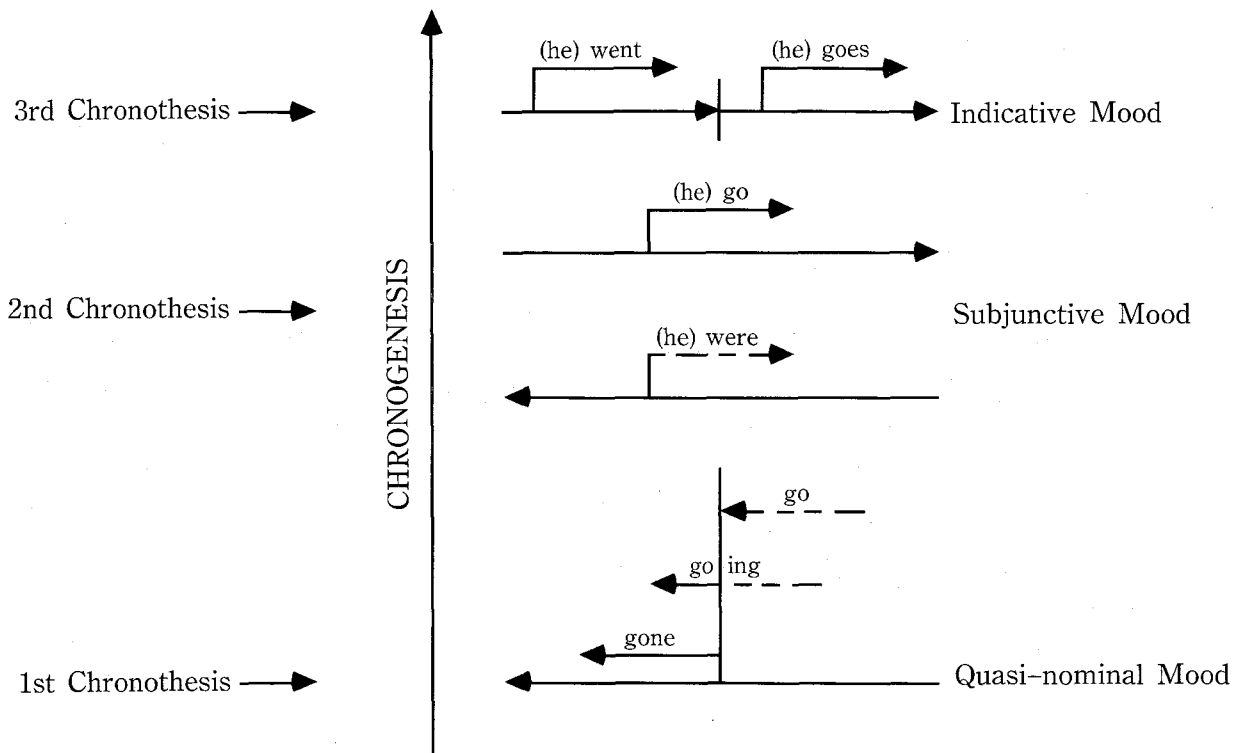
4.2 The System of Aspect

In previous sections (1.2.1, 1.2.2, 2.1, 3.3, 3.4), we examined the almost insurmountable difficulties encountered in attempting to arrive at a coherent understanding of the category of aspect in English, from both the terminological and conceptual points of view. Some new terminology will be introduced in this section, not because it is expected that it will

supplant more traditional terms, but because it is both useful and necessary for an understanding of our proposed analysis, illustrating how the system of aspect functions in English.
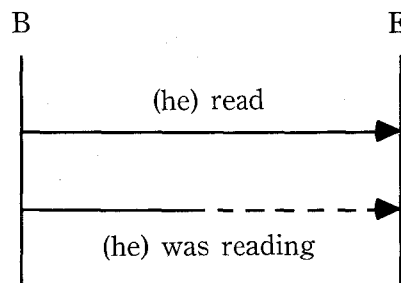
In terms of the operative program underlying the English verb, we have seen that the system of mood can be explained on the basis of universe time, a development of the image of time from its most rudimentary, to an expression of the virtual, and finally to denote that which is considered real. The system of aspect, on the other hand, is based on event time, the time contained in any event. The category of aspect has three characteristics: it is based on event time; it finds expression in every mood, tense, and person; and it permits distinctions of time without reference to time spheres.

In English event time can be viewed in two ways: from within, or from a retrospective point of view. In other words, the system of aspect is a means of providing an image of the event's interior, or of its aftermath. These two operational possibilities whereby the mind can provide itself with a representation of event time can be described as *immanent* (from the Latin: *im*-inside; *manere*-remaining, permanent) and *transcendent* (*trans*-beyond; *ao*-going) aspect, respectively (see Hirtle, 1975).

4.2.1 Immanent Aspect

The representation of event time in the immanent aspect involves the interior of the event. There are several ways of expressing an event's interior in English:

- the simple form — the speaker can represent the whole of the event from beginning to end — e.g., He *read* the book.
- the progressive form — the speaker can represent only part of the action, implying the rest as a possible accomplishment — e.g., He *was reading* the book.
- emphatic *do* (*do* auxiliary + infinitive)[7] — e.g., He *did read* the book.

```
B                           E
|                           |
|         (he) read         |
|--------------------------▶|
|                           |
|- - - - - - - - - - - - - ▶|
|      (he) was reading     |
```

In each of these cases, our perspective on the action of the verb is from inside the event, viewing the unrolling of the event as whole (the simple form) or as part (the progressive form).[8] Thus, with the immanent aspect, there are several positions, a multiplicity of signs, to denote the event as nascent, as a coming-to-be. Each position provides a different perspective, but with each, the subject's field of possible activity is

inside the event. Of importance here is the fact that the simple and progressive forms exist in opposition to one another as two positions within the immanent aspect, each of which gives a differing perspective on the interior of the event.

4.2.2 Transcendent Aspect

In contrast to the multiplicity of signs in the immanent aspect, in the transcendent aspect there is only one position, one sign, that can provide a view of an event in retrospect, a position after: the auxiliary verb *to have* + the past participle (most often referred to as the perfect in traditional terminology).
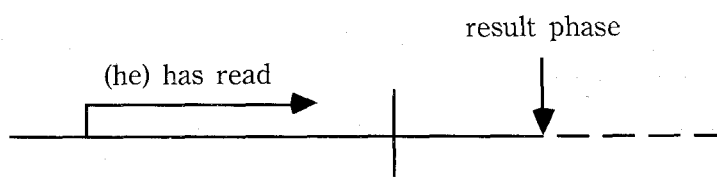
With the transcendent aspect, the event itself is something that is already spent, already accomplished. The subject is represented in a result phase, in the aftermath of the event. The event is felt as something having happened before the point in time to which the subject is referred, regardless of whether this point is in the past, the moment of speaking itself, or the future; whatever the position, the event itself is only evoked in its retrospect.

4.2.3 A Synthesis of the System of Aspect

The system of aspect is rather simple in its design, but one with wide–ranging consequences in English, giving rise to a vast array of nuances and expressive effects on the level of discourse. This system is essentially one of position, opposing the immanence of an event to its transcendence. Through the two aspects of the English verb, we see the duration of an event differently: the subject in time after the event (transcendent) or the subject in time within the event (immanent). As a result, distinctions of time can be made throughout the verb system independent of any reference to past, present, or future. For example, *he ate* and *he had eaten* differ not as to time sphere, as both are past, but rather in the way the event is viewed; i.e., from inside or in retrospect.

ASPECT	PAST	PRESENT	FUTURE
IMMANENT	At six o'clock I left my office.	At six o'clock I leave my office.	At six o'clock I will leave my office.
TRANSCENDANT	At six o'clock I had left my office.	At six o'clock I have left my office.	At six o'clock I will have left my office.

In the examples above, we see the duration of leaving differently depending on the aspect: with the retrospective view, we see the subject in time after the event; with the inside view, the subject is in time within the event. With *left / leave / will leave,* event time is represented from its interior from beginning to end. With *had left / have left / will have left,* we do not see the person go through the event from beginning to end; the subject is in a position somewhere "after," and we look back on the event in retrospect. In other words, if I say, "At six o'clock I *leave* my office," it is understood that I start out at six; if I say, "At six o'clock I *have left* my office," don't call at six because I won't be there.

Consider the following more detailed examples which show clearly how aspect is independent of time spheres:

- present time sphere
(a) He *is* sick.
(b) He *has been* sick.

(a) is an example of the immanent aspect in which the subject is somewhere in the interior of the event of *being sick.* (b), as an example of the transcendent aspect, allows us to view the event of *being sick* from its aftermath. It gives us a retrospective point of view, and allows us to imagine that there might be some result of this sickness, such as an inability to go to work, a pale complexion, or something of that nature. The simple form *is* allows us to see the event from its interior or coming-to-be. *Been* evokes the impression that the event has been fully realized, and *has* puts us in the result phase of that sickness.

- past time sphere
(a) He was disqualified because he *was* absent.
(b) He was disqualified because he *had been* absent.

The immanent aspect, shown in (a), evokes the impression that the disqualification and the fact of being absent both occurred at the same time in the past. We view the events from their immanence because of the simple form. In (b), however, we get a different impression. The transcendent aspect, illustrated by *had been* absent, allows us to view the "absenteeism" from a retrospective point of view, and puts us into the result phase of the event which coincides with the disqualification.

4.3 The System of Tense

The system of tense in English is based on a very concrete dichotomy: that between time which has already existed and time which does not exist yet. Tense is usually referred to in the indicative mood and in some grammars the subjunctive as well. It can also be generalized to include the quasi-nominal. In the indicative mood, tense refers to a place in

time: past or non–past. In the subjunctive mood, tense indicates whether the potential expressed by the verb is capable of being realized or not (present vs past subjunctive). Generalized into the quasi–nominal, tense provides for the different ways of looking at an event in time: as yet to be realized (infinitive), as being realized (present participle), or as already realized (past participle).

The system of tense presupposes both a representation of universe time in which the system of mood has produced its results, and also a representation of event time, allowing us to view the event from within or from its aftermath. In this way, tense is a verbal category which results in a combined image of event time and universe time, providing the mechanism whereby an event is made incident to the time containing it.

5.0 Conclusion

A verb is an operative mechanism for representing time grammatically. A sufficient image of the verb in English must include a representation of the time containing an event, the time contained in an event, and a conjugation of the two. As a result, every verb in English has a mood (universe time), an aspect (event time), and a tense (a conjugation of the two).

Once the system of aspect has provided a representation event time, either in its immanence or in its transcendence, the operation of the formation of a time image proceeds to construct a representation of universe time by means of the system of mood. The system of tense then serves to combine the two, to conjugate the image of event time in one of the moods by providing the event with its place in universe time, evoking in some way the incidence to universe time of either the event's interior or aftermath. In this way, *tense* provides us with distinctions in time, *aspect* with distinctions in perspective, and *mood* with distinctions in potential for actualization.

As we have tried to show, this approach to the system of the English verb illustrates a coherence, an elegant simplicity on the level of underlying meaning, giving rise to the most subtle and varied nuances on the level of discourse. When grammar is viewed solely on the level of discourse, when language is seen only as a summation rather than an operative system, we can never achieve this systematic, coherent understanding of how grammatical forms give rise to the myriad expressive effects associated with their use in context.

Footnotes

1. Teaching grammars are distinguished from reference grammars and textbooks in the following way. Reference grammars, both modern and traditional, contain some explanation of theory and provide numerous examples of usage, but do not normally include drills and exercises for student use. They are most often used as reference guides. Teaching grammars and workbooks generally supply less extensive grammatical explanations and theory, and contain drills and exercises for student practice.
2. This concept will be explained more fully later, starting in section 4.0.1.

3. Graduate seminars conducted at Laval University by Professors Hirtle, Valin, and Hewson are the source of much of the material presented in this work, as well as textbooks and articles written by these scholars and listed in the References. Every attempt has been made to acknowledge sources where possible, except when terminology or explanations of theory are considered to be part of a general understanding of this approach to linguistics, and thus employable by anyone writing in the field.

4. A selected bibiography of the principal publications of Gustave Guillaume can be found in Hirtle & Hewson's (1984) translation of Guillaume's *Foundations for a Science of Language* listed in the References.

5. By way of illustration, Guillaume cites the correspondence between the following words for the English expression, *I carry*: *bharami* (Sanskrit), *berem* (Armenian), *bear* (English), *beru* (Russian), *phero* (Greek), *fero* (Latin), *baira* (Gothic), *berim* (Irish), *birni* (Albanian), *gebaren* (German) (1984, p. 39).

6. It should be noted that the imperative is considered by some grammarians to be a mood of English. Hirtle (*viva voce*), however, views it as a special use of the indicative. Most verbs in the imperative make use of the 2nd person singular of the indicative; *to be* derives its imperative from the subjunctive.

7. Analysis of emphatic *do* in this regard is beyond our scope here, and so will not be considered further. A detailed analysis of its use in the immanent aspect can be found in Hirtle (1967, p. 15; 1975, p. 25).

8. Comrie (1976) refers to this opposition between whole and part as perfective vs imperfective, and classifies them as two separate aspects.

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